

Times Argus

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## Delegation plan swells wilderness

Vermont's congressional delegation Thursday proposed almost doubling the amount of wilderness lands in the Green Mountain National Forest.

Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., Sen. James Jeffords, I-Vt., and Rep. Bernard Sanders, I-Vt., jointly introduced the Vermont Wilderness Act of 2006, which would add 47,000 acres to wilderness protection. There are 59,000 acres already so designated in the 400,000-acre national forest.

The proposal would create a new wilderness area south of the existing Bread Loaf wilderness area on Romance and Monastery mountains in Goshen and Hancock.

It will be named for famed 19th-century land conservationist Joseph Battell of Middlebury, whose landholdings were the basis for the northern half of the forest. Battell also donated to the state its signature mountaintop, Camel's Hump.

The staff of the U.S. Forest Service in Vermont had proposed adding 27,000 acres of protected wilderness just two weeks ago. A joint statement by the two senators and Sanders said their proposal "closely resembled" the proposal by the Forest Service.

"The delegation bill closely tracks the Forest Service plan," their statement said.

The final decision rests with Congress.

Wilderness designation means that motorized uses are banned in that section of the forest — whether it is logging, road-building or recreation such as snowmobiles and all-terrain vehicles. It remains open to hunting, fishing, camping and hiking.

In several cases, the delegation turned areas categorized as "remote backcountry" — sometimes dubbed "wilderness lite" — into full wilderness protection.

"Our legislation is a compromise between those who would prefer significant additions in wilderness areas and those who would prefer none," Leahy said.

"This legislation will help the Green Mountain National Forest remain one of Vermont's most precious environmental treasures," said Jeffords, who is retiring this year.

Sanders, who is running for Jeffords seat, called the bill "an important step forward in preserving wilderness for future generations of Vermonters, while honoring the tradition of Vermont's working landscape." Leanne Klyza Linck, spokeswoman for The Wilderness Society office in Hinesburg, offered qualified praise for the proposed legislation.

She noted that it would create two new wilderness areas and enlarge four existing areas.

The bill calls for creation of the 12,437-acre Battell area in Addison County, the 28,500-acre Glastenbury Mountain wilderness area in Bennington County, and expansion of existing wilderness areas of Breadloaf, Peru Peak, Lye Brook and Big Branch.

"But it falls short of the 78,000 acres proposed by the Vermont Wilderness Association," she said, referring to the Vermont coalition of environmental groups that had lobbied hard for a big jump in wilderness designation.

James Northup, one of the founders of the Wilderness Association and executive director of Forest Watch, an environmental group based in Richmond, said the legislation was a step toward "fulfilling Battell's last wishes and would provide a fitting final chapter to his wildlands legacy."

"The 100-square mile Glastenbury Mountain-Lye Brook wilderness complex is the biggest, best opportunity we have for restoring wilderness conditions in Vermont," he said. "It is one of the few places in Vermont that appears big and wild when viewed from outer space and deserves stronger, more far reaching protections than are proposed."

Critics of wilderness designation, including the Vermont Forest Products Industry and the Vermont Traditions Coalition, said they were outraged late Thursday.

"What are they thinking? It's unbelievable!" said Ed Larson, executive director of the forestry group.

"They are out to destroy the forest products industry," he said. "Bernie (Sanders) has always stood for the little guy, I just don't get this. He seems to ignore them in this case."

Larson said several of his members already had to buy logs from out of state, and in some cases from Canada.

"Businesses have to seek their raw material elsewhere, and it's costing them more," Larson said, noting that one business was importing spruce logs from New Brunswick and Nova Scotia to make house clapboards.

"This is no compromise," Larson said.

Steven McLeod, spokesman for Vermont Traditions Coalition — a group made up of hunting groups, the Farm Bureau, the state's sugarmakers, some towns and individuals — said the proposal was elitist, pure and simple.

"They've turned their backs on the local communities," he said, referring to 10 Vermont towns who have a big investment — their land — in the forest.

McLeod, citing visitor registrations at the Forest Service's offices, said only a tiny fraction of the forest's visitors come for the restricted wilderness lands.

"Why are they adding to a category that no one's using?" he said. "It doesn't make any sense."

"The land is being privatized for a very small number of users," he said, maintaining that the change to wilderness had "zero environmental benefits" such as creating wildlife habitat.

"The congressional delegation has made things twice as bad," he said.

Linck, of the Wilderness Society, said she couldn't understand the argument that wilderness was "elitist."

"It's open to everybody," she said. "Not everyone can afford a

snowmobile or an ATV."

David Carle, spokesman for Leahy, said it was unclear whether the Vermont Wilderness Act of 2006 would see action in the last 60 days of this Congress.

He said two proposed wilderness bills are pending for lands in New Hampshire and Virginia, and Vermont's bill might be joined with those.